

CALIFORNIA OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES



PARALEGALS



WHAT DOES A PARALEGAL DO?

PARALEGALS research legal issues and do other background work under the supervision of a lawyer. Paralegals are not licensed to practice law, but help lawyers in their practice. Paralegals are also called Legal Assistants or Attorney Assistants.

The tasks of a Paralegal depend on the size of the law office. Paralegals perform the following tasks:

- Research appropriate laws, judicial decisions, and legal articles.
- Prepare legal opinions or memoranda to help an attorney decide how the case should be handled.
- Prepare legal documents and exhibits, file pleadings with the court, obtain affidavits, and help an attorney during the trial or administrative hearings.
- Maintain files of documents and correspondence important to a case.

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2003

INTEREST AREA
ENTERPRISING



- Draft documents such as contracts, mortgages, separation agreements, and wills, and trusts.
- Confer with lawyers and interview clients and witnesses.
- May coordinate the activities of law office employees and keep financial records for the office.

Paralegals employed in community legal service projects help the poor, aged, and others in need of legal service aid. Paralegals perform the following tasks:

- File forms.
- Research and prepare documents.
- Represent clients at administrative hearings when authorized by statute.

Most Paralegals work for law firms, government agencies, and corporations. Paralegals often specialize in one area of law such as:

- Real estate
- Will and estate planning
- Family law
- Labor law
- Corporate law
- Criminal and civil litigation

WHAT SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT?

Important skills, knowledge, and abilities for Paralegals include:

- Reading Comprehension – Understanding written sentences and paragraphs in work-related documents.
- Writing – Communicating effectively in writing as appropriate for the needs of the audience.

- Critical Thinking – Using logic and reasoning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions, conclusions or approaches to problems.
- Speaking – Talking to others to convey information effectively.
- Negotiation – Bringing others together and trying to reconcile differences.
- Coordination – Adjusting actions in relation to others' actions.
- Complex Problem Solving – Identifying complex problems and reviewing related information to develop and evaluate options and implement solutions.
- Law and Government – Knowledge of laws, legal codes, court procedures, precedents, government regulations, executive orders, agency rules, and the democratic political process.
- Clerical – Knowledge of administrative and clerical procedures and systems such as word processing, managing files and records, stenography and transcription, designing forms, and other office procedures and terminology.
- Written Comprehension – The ability to read and understand information and ideas presented in writing.
- Oral Comprehension – The ability to listen to and understand information and ideas presented through spoken words and sentences.
- Deductive Reasoning – The ability to apply general rules to specific problems to produce answers that make sense.

WHAT'S THE WORK ENVIRONMENT?

Most Paralegals work at desks in law offices and law libraries where they use computers to research rules of law, statutes, and cases. They may travel to other locations to gather information and file documents.

Union Membership

There has been little or no unionization of Paralegals.

WHAT'S THE CALIFORNIA JOB OUTLOOK?

The following information is from the occupational projections produced by the Employment Development Department (EDD) Labor Market Information Division (LMID):

Estimated number of workers in 2000:	19,900
Estimated number of workers in 2010:	27,200
Projected Growth 2000-2010:	36.7%
Est. openings due to separations by 2010:	1,400

These figures do not include self-employment.

The occupation of Paralegals is expected to rank among the top 100 fastest growing occupations in California. Employment of Paralegals is expected to grow much faster than average compared with all occupations in California. Competition for jobs should continue, even though there are a large number of graduates from Paralegal educational programs, employers prefer those with at least three years of experience.

Trends

Employment of Paralegals is projected to increase as employers recognize that Paralegals do many legal tasks for lower salaries than lawyers. Most job openings will result from new job opportunities as the industry expands.

WHAT DOES THE JOB PAY?

California Earnings

Paralegals and Legal Assistants 2002 Wages

Hourly wages range from	\$18.74	to	\$28.23
Average hourly wage			\$23.90
Average annual wage			\$49,708

Source: Occupational Employment Survey of Employers by EDD/LMID.

Overtime is paid for hours worked beyond 40 hours. In addition, many law firms pay bonuses based on seniority or merit, or a combination of both.

Hours

Most Paralegals work a standard 40-hour week. Paralegals who work for law firms sometimes work very long hours when they are under pressure to meet deadlines.

Benefits

Benefits for Paralegals usually include the following:

- Vacation, holidays, and sick leave.
- Medical, dental, and life insurance.
- Retirement plans.

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR THIS JOB?

Education and Training

There are several ways of getting into the paralegal profession. A Paralegal can have one or a combination of the following:

- On the job training
- Bachelor's degree (4 years)
- Associate's degree (2 years)
- Paralegal certificate

Some employers train legal personnel on their staff, such as legal secretaries, for Paralegal positions. Increasingly, employers prefer graduates of four-year paralegal programs, or college graduates who have completed paralegal certificate programs.

Community colleges and four-year institutions offer paralegal courses. Many of the classes are offered in the afternoon and evening. Schools offer general paralegal training within different areas of law that include:

- Legal research techniques
- Introduction to law
- Law office administration
- Real estate
- Estate planning and probate

- Litigation
- Family law
- Income taxes
- Corporate law

Licensing and Certification

Currently, Paralegals are not required to be licensed or certified. However, there are two voluntary certification exams. A Paralegal may elect to take either the Certified Legal Assistant (CLA) exam or the Paralegal Advanced Competency Exam (PACE). Currently, the CLA is the most common exam in California.

The National Association of Legal Assistants has established standards for the CLA. Paralegals who meet these standards are eligible to take a two-day examination given by the Certifying Board of Legal Assistants. This examination is administered each year at several regional testing centers. Persons who pass this examination may use the title CLA.

The National Federation of Paralegal Associations (NFPA) developed the PACE exam as a tool to measure and evaluate competency and the level of expertise. Candidates that successfully pass the exam and meet the continuing education requirements may use the title, Registered Paralegal (RP).

In California, Certified Legal Assistants may become certified as a California Advanced Specialist (CAS) by successfully passing a 4-hour exam in a specialty area. The CAS exam is offered three times per year in five specialty areas: Business Organizations, Estates and Trusts, Family Law, Civil Litigation, and Real Estate. For further information on the CAS exam, refer to the National Association of Legal Assistants, and California Alliance of Paralegal Associations listed under "Other Sources of Information."

Certification along with the accompanying title is a sign of competence in the field and may enhance employment and advancement opportunities.

Continuing Education

Paralegals are required to complete continuing legal education (CLE) courses that are approved by the State Bar of California:

- Four hours of legal ethics every three years.
- Four hours of general or specialized legal education units every two years.

Holders of the Certified Legal Assistant, California Advanced Specialist, and Registered Paralegal certificates need to meet continuing education requirements to maintain their certification. The renewal periods and continuing education requirements are as follows:

Certified Legal Assistant

- Certification is renewed every five years.
- Proof of completion of 50 hours of approved continuing legal education credits within the five-year renewal period.

California Advanced Specialist

- Certification is renewed every five years.
- Proof of completion of 70 hours of approved continuing legal education credits within the five-year renewal period.

Registered Paralegal

- Certification is renewed every two years.
- Proof of completion of 12 hours of approved continuing legal education credits within the two-year renewal period.

HOW DO I FIND THE JOB?

Job seekers should search:

- Classified ads
- Local newspapers
- Law journals
- College and University Career Centers
- Personnel departments of federal, State, city, and county government agencies
- Local paralegal association job banks

The Internet is another helpful resource of employment information for job seekers. Many local Paralegal associations offer employment job banks on their Web sites. Refer to "Other Sources of Information" for information about Paralegal associations.

Direct application to employers remains one of the most effective job search methods. Private firms are listed in the yellow pages under Paralegals and Legal Services. California job openings can be found at various online job-listing systems including CalJOBSSM at www.caljobs.ca.gov or at America's Job Bank at www.ajb.dni.us.

For other occupational and wage information and a listing of the largest employers in any county, visit the Employment Development Department Labor Market Information Web page at www.calmis.ca.gov. Find further job search assistance from your nearest Job Service office www.edd.ca.gov/jsloc.htm or the closest One-Stop site listed on the California WorkNet site, www.sjtcc.ca.gov/sjtccweb/one-stop.

WHERE CAN THIS JOB LEAD?

Paralegals can advance to supervisory, coordinator, and trainer positions. Generally, only a few large firms offer promotional opportunities. Some Paralegals go to law school and become lawyers; others open their own paralegal firms or may become sub-contractors for legal services.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

National Association of Legal Assistants
1516 South Boston Street, Suite 200
Tulsa, OK 74119
(918) 587-6828
www.nala.org

National Federation of Paralegal Associations
P.O. Box 33108
Kansas City, MO 64114
(816) 941-4000
www.paralegals.org

California Alliance of Paralegal Associations
P.O. Box 1089
San Leandro, CA 94577
www.caparalegal.org

Sacramento Valley Paralegal Association
P.O. Box 453
Sacramento, CA 95812-0453
(916) 428-1740
www.svpa.org

Employment Projections by Occupation
www.calmis.ca.gov/htmlfile/subject/occproj.htm

Employment and Wages by Occupation
[www.calmis.ca.gov/file/occup\\$/OES\\$.htm](http://www.calmis.ca.gov/file/occup$/OES$.htm)

RELATED OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES

Legal Secretaries	No. 172
Attorneys	No. 322

OCCUPATIONAL CODE REFERENCES

SOC (*Standard Occupational Classification*)
Paralegals and Legal Assistants 23-2011

O*NET (*Occupational Information Network*)
Paralegals and Legal Assistants 23-2011.00

OES (*Occupational Employment Statistics*)
Paralegal Personnel 28305

DOT (*Dictionary of Occupational Titles*)
Legal Investigator 119.267-022
Paralegal 119.267-026